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ANOTHER MODERNISM?

CLEMENS HOLZMEISTER, JOSEF FRANK,
AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF INTERWAR
VIENNA I

In 1924 the German architectural critic Adolf Behne published an article on the theme of 'function and form' in the journal *Sozialistische Monatshefte*. The article summed up the principles of modern architectural design:

It was the drive to play [*Spieltrieb*] that prompted, from time to time, certain changing laws of form... they were secondary in the genesis of all building, but in the history of the development of human building they became, without question, the harder, firmer, more rigid principle, than the pure fulfilment of instrumental function. Attention to form overwhelmed attention to purpose. The return to purpose always had a revolutionary effect; it throws off tyrannical forms so that, considering the original function from the most neutral standpoint possible, it can create a rejuvenated, lively, breathing form.²

Behne thus introduced a theme – the primacy of function – that he would articulate at greater length two years later in *Modern Functional Architecture*.³ The idea of function determining form was, of course, coined by Louis Sullivan some thirty years earlier, but unlike the American architect, Behne developed the idea into a more comprehensive thesis, in which functionalism comprised the modernity of architectural design.⁴ Playfulness – aesthetics, ornamentation – had its place, he acknowledged, but modern functional design challenged the tyranny of inherited, ossified forms, which, he argued, were often *dysfunctional*. Behne's article, and later book, are significant since they can stand, metonymically, for an entire critical literature on the development of modern architecture that helped, in the 1920s and 1930s, disseminate a vision of architectural history as driven by technology, progress, and function, underpinning what Panayiotis Tournikiotis has termed the 'objectification' of modern architecture.⁵ The writings in question are well known. They include, for example, Walter Curt Behrendt's *The Victory of the New Building Style* (1927), Siegfried Giedion's *Building in France* (1928), Henry Russell Hitchcock's *The International Style: Architecture since 1922* (1932), Nikolaus Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936), and Giedion's *Space, Time and*

1 The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the European Research Council project Continuity / Rupture: Art and Architecture in Central Europe 1918-1939 (Project Number 786314).
2 Adolf Behne, 'Funktion und Form', *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 12, 1924. Reprinted in Kristina Hartmann (ed.), *Trotzdem Modern: Die wichtigsten Texte zur Architektur*

in Deutschland 1918–1933, Braunschweig 1994, p. 127.

3 Adolf Behne, *Der moderne Zweckbau*, Munich 1926.

4 Sullivan famously stated that 'form ever follows function' in his essay 'The Tall Office Building, Artistically Considered', *Lippincott's Magazine*, March 1896, p. 408.
5 Panayiotis Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, Cambridge 1999.

Architecture (1941). These promulgated not only an ideology of modern architecture but also a modern architectural canon, which, despite doctrinal differences, has remained remarkably consistent.

Subsequent disaffection with modernism has led to critical reassessment of these values, and, more recently, scepticism towards their Eurocentrism. Modern architecture assumed various guises across the world, it is now recognized, in response to a diverse array of local contexts.⁶ Yet for all their embrace of the *rhetoric* of diversity, the most influential histories of modern architecture have proven stubbornly conservative in adhering to a core narrative that privileges the same architectural ‘pioneers’. Thus, even the most recent editions of surveys such as Jean-Louis Cohen’s *The Future of Architecture since 1889*, Colin Davies’s *A New History of Modern Architecture*, or Curtis’s slightly earlier *Modern Architecture since 1900*, while occasionally looking beyond Europe and North America, focus on a familiar roster of names: Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.⁷

It is not difficult to identify the exclusions that result from this canonical account. The focus of this essay is on the distorting effect the traditional narrative has had on the historiography of Austrian architecture. For while, on the one hand, the place of Austria (and of Vienna in particular) in the history of modernism is secure thanks to pre-war landmarks such as Wagner’s Postal Savings Bank (1906) and the Loos House (1911), it becomes curiously invisible after 1918. Examination of the grounds for this situation brings to light both the history of Austrian architecture in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the implications of what I term, here, the ‘orthodox narrative’ of architectural modernism.

It would, of course, be incorrect to state that Vienna disappears *entirely* from the map of architectural history. Above all, the city is associated with Red Vienna and the ambitious scheme of communal housing undertaken by the Social Democratic municipality between 1919 and 1934. A scheme with monumental ambitions – some 60,000 apartments were constructed – it saw

6 Recent examples of modernist historiography that has adopted a more global perspective include: Edward Denison and Guang Yu Ren, *Modernism in China: Architectural Visions and Revolutions*, London 2008; Sybil Bozdoğan and Esra Akcan, *Turkey: Modern Architectures in History*, London 2012; Sean Anderson,

7 *Modern Architecture and Its Representation in Colonial Eritrea*, London 2017. Jean-Louis Cohen, *The Future of Architecture since 1889: A Worldwide History*, London 2016; Colin Davies, *A New History of Modern Architecture*, London 2018; William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, London 1996, 3rd edition.

nearly every major architect in Vienna involved in designing one or more housing developments, including Adolf Loos, Leopold Bauer, Karl Ehn, Rudolf Perco, and, above all, Hubert Gessner. The architectural projects of Red Vienna have, understandably, been the subject of intense scholarly as well as popular interest.⁸ This is, however, anomalous when one considers the place of Austria in the wider history of modernism; arguably, it has less to do with the contribution of the architectural designs to ideas of public housing than with the embrace of Social Democratic and leftist politics, with which the majority of architectural historians are in sympathy. Indeed, it is worth comparing current enthusiasm for Red Vienna with the dissenting voice of the radical Marxist architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, who criticized the communal housing projects as a regressive formal utopia that masked the fact that the city council otherwise did little to overturn existing economic inequalities.⁹ Tafuri's stance reflected the times in which he was writing and echoed his dissatisfaction with the compromises made by the Italian Communist Party in the 1970s, but it recalls concerns already being voiced in Vienna in the 1920s.¹⁰ When building work began on the Jedleseer Garden Town (now known as the Karl-Seitz Hof) in 1926 (fig. 1), the architect Josef Frank published a polemical review that dismissed Hubert Gessner's design, which he famously termed a 'People's Apartment Palace' (*Volkswohnungspalast*), as totally outdated, as a relic of the sentimental Viennese attachment to the architectural culture of the old aristocracy.¹¹ The design did nothing, Frank argued, to further the cause of housing reform; its model was an architecture that was 'clotted up with ornaments made of stucco and plaster' rather than the 'honesty and objectivity' of the bourgeois era.¹²

Frank's reference to 'objectivity' (*Sachlichkeit*) invokes a rhetoric familiar from Behne, but in fact Frank stood at odds with the functionalist ideology of Behne. Frank was a member of the Werkbund, but he was nevertheless critical of what he

8 See, for example, Eve Blau, *The Architecture of Red Vienna*, Cambridge 1999; Helmut Weihsmann, *Das Rote Wien: Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik 1919–1934*, Wien 1985; Werner Michael Schwartz and Georg Spitaler (eds.), *Das Rote Wien 1919–1934: Ideen, Debatten, Praxis*, Wien 2019.

9 Manfredo Tafuri, *Vienna Rossa: La Politica Residenziale nella Vienna Socialista 1919–1938*, Milano 1980.

10 Johan Frederik Hartle, 'Manfredo Tafuri und die Ideologie der Form', in Schwartz and Spitaler (note 7), p. 204.

11 Josef Frank, 'Der Volkswohnungspalast' (1926), in Christopher Long, Tano Bojankin, and Iris Meder (eds.), *Josef Frank. Schriften*, vol. I, Wien 2012, pp. 254–266. Originally published in *Der Aufbau* 1/7, August 1926, pp. 59–62.

12 Ibidem, p. 258.

termed the ‘puritanism’ of his colleagues. In a series of articles throughout the 1920s and 1930s he argued consistently for the necessity of *symbols* as a means of ‘overcoming materialism... so as to have a firm reference point for our vacillating personalities’.¹³ Ornamentation, too, was necessary, for ‘uniformity and plainness foster restlessness, ornament and variety promote a sense of calm and alleviate the pathos of pure functional form’.¹⁴ These articles culminated in his book-length study of 1931, *Architecture as Symbol*, that laid out a broad historical genealogy of the present, the principal purpose of which was to reiterate his basic polemic against functionalism. Progressive architecture, he argued, ‘can only be based upon a shared tradition that is comprehensible to all and can bring about the greatest measure of civic culture’.¹⁵ This had little in common with the dreams of a progressive future of contemporaries such as Mies, Gropius, or, indeed, Karel Teige in neighbouring Czechoslovakia.

Frank’s critique was not motivated by a conservative historicism; he was equally critical of the jumble of styles that characterized the architecture of the Ringstrasse. He was, however, opposed to the neglect of human historical experience that seemed so central to the architectural doctrines of his German peers in the Werkbund. In this, he may be compared with his contemporary, the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, who was equally dismissive of functionalism, which, Bloch argued, paraded a soullessness evacuated of content, in which the fetishism of pure form and function became a dead-end. Hence, he argued, ‘this kind of thing claimed to be a purging of the mustiness of the previous century and its unspeakable decoration. But the longer it went on... the more clearly the motto emerges as an inscription over the Bauhaus and that which is connected with it: “Hurrah we have run out of ideas!”’¹⁶ Both Bloch and Frank were subsequently marginalized in their respective fields, an indication, perhaps, of the power of orthodox narratives to determine the shape of historical memory.

13 Josef Frank, ‘Vom neuen Stil’ (year), in Long, Bojankin, and Meder (note 10), p. 320.

14 Josef Frank, ‘Die modern Einrichtung des Wohnhauses’ (1927), in Long, Bojankin, and Meder (note 10), p. 340.

15 Josef Frank, ‘Architektur als Symbol’ (1931), in Christopher Long, Tano Bojankin, and Iris Meder (eds.), *Josef Frank. Schriften*, vol. II, Wien 2012, p. 178.

16 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge 1995, p. 735.

Alongside involvement in the Werkbund in Germany, Frank co-organized the Werkbund exhibition in Vienna in 1932.¹⁷ But in addition to championing ornament – particularly noticeable in his interior designs – he dissented in other ways, too, from the growing orthodoxy of the architectural profession. Hence, although he co-designed, with Adolf Loos, Peter Behrens, and Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, the Winarsky Hof development in Vienna between 1924 and 1926 (fig. 2), he had no further involvement in the mass apartment blocks of Red Vienna; instead, he promoted private houses and smaller-scale projects. This also ran contrary to the preoccupations of most of his contemporaries with large-scale housing solutions. Hence, working against the grain, he failed to secure much support and in 1933 emigrated to Sweden, where he worked as chief designer for the Stockholm design company Svenskt Tenn. As a result, he barely features in histories of modern architecture. Being fully associated neither with Red Vienna, nor with the principle doctrinal schools of functionalist architecture elsewhere, his work and ideas have attracted only sporadic and limited interest.¹⁸ As Sabrina Rahman has recently noted, Giedion's influential *Space, Time and Architecture* edited out the Austrian Werkbund, as well as Frank in particular, from the history of modernism.¹⁹

A more problematic figure than Josef Frank, but one who casts similar light on the construction of the modern architectural canon, is Clemens Holzmeister (1886–1983). Like Frank, Holzmeister trained at the Technische Hochschule in Vienna, and he was even involved in the Werkbund in Austria, yet in other respects he was a completely different figure. The Werkbund exhibition in 1932 attracted criticism from right-wing circles for the excessive 'Jewish' influence (Frank, amongst others, was of Jewish origin). A year later, conservative members of the association, including Holzmeister, left the organization and set up the Neuer Werkbund, which was rooted in a reactionary

17 See the catalogue Josef Frank (ed.), *Neues Bauen in der Welt: Die Internationale Werkbundsiedlung Wien 1932*, Wien 1932. The estate was recently examined in Andreas Nierhaus, Eva-Maria Orosz, Otto Kapfinger, et al., *Werbundsiedlung Wien 1932: Ein Manifest neuen Wohnens*, Wien 2012.

18 The main advocate on behalf of Frank has been Christopher Long, who, alongside editing Frank's collected writings, has written two book-length studies on him: *Josef Frank: Life and Work* (Chicago 2002) and *The New Space: Movement*

and Experience in Viennese Modern Architecture (London and New Haven 2016). See, too, Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Hermann Czech, and Sebastian Hackenschmidt (eds.), *Josef Frank – against design. Das anti-formalistische Werk des Architekten / The Architect's Anti-Formalist Oeuvre*, Wien 2016.

19 Sabrina Rahman, "'Out of All That is Alive and Felt': The Austrian Werkbund and the Design of Social Democracy", *Journal of Design History* XXXII, 2019, No. 4, p. 353.

cultural politics that differed markedly from the Social Democratic orientation of the original association.

Holzmeister's first major commission, and the work that brought him to public attention, was the crematorium in Vienna, built in 1922. This might have marked him out as a progressive free thinker, for the issue of cremation was highly politicized; with the Catholic Church and the Christian Social government vehemently opposed, advocacy of cremation signified a commitment to secular liberal thought. Yet Holzmeister's design was anomalous within his oeuvre as a whole, since his reputation was built on two pillars: as the architect of numerous churches and as a key figure in the formulation of the cultural programme of the authoritarian Ständestaat that came into existence in 1933, when Engelbert Dollfuss abolished democratic government and assumed dictatorial powers. These roles were interconnected, for Holzmeister was a deeply pious Catholic and highly supportive of Dollfuss, for whom Catholicism defined the identity of the state he governed. Like Frank, Holzmeister was also a prolific author, but his writings circled incessantly around the role of the Church in modern society, expressing his wish for contemporary culture to be based on Catholic values.²⁰

Given his role as the main cultural commissar of the authoritarian regime – he was responsible for the cultural programme of the German Catholic Congress of 1933 in Vienna, at which Dollfuss announce his vision for the state – one might dismiss Holzmeister as politically compromised. This would be doubly so, given his role in 1931 as designer of the Düsseldorf-located national memorial to Albert Schlageter, an opponent of the occupying French forces who was executed for sabotage in 1923 and quickly became the focus of a nationalist, and then Nazi, cult.²¹ However, Holzmeister was a more complex figure. On the one hand, he was imbued with a deep reverence for tradition, but on the other, his church designs display a concerted effort to adapt the advances in architectural thinking of the previous decades to the demands of the Church. This was in contrast to the unease in many quarters of the Catholic Church with anything other than revivalist styles that evoked past, that is, medieval, glories. The most significant example of this kind of

20 See, for example, Clemens Holzmeister, *Kirche im Kampf*, Wien 1936, and *Kirche am Werk: Vorträge über Not und Leistung der Kirche in der gegenwärtigen Welt*, Wien 1937.

21 On Schlageter and the memorial built in his name, see Stefan Zwicker, *Albert Leo Schlageter und Julius Fucik: Heldenkult, Propaganda und Erinnerungskultur*, Paderborn 2006, especially pp. 90–96.

compromise is Holzmeister's design for the Seipel-Dollfuss Memorial Church in Vienna (fig. 3). Originally commissioned to the memory of Ignaz Seipel (1876–1932), chancellor of Austria in the 1920s, the church ended up also being a monument to Dollfuss, who was assassinated in the summer of 1934. This was one of the most important state architectural commissions, yet rather than designing a grandiose monument, Holzmeister opted for a modest, functional, low-key building, stripped of any external ornamentation. For contemporary commentators this evoked the humility of St. Francis of Assisi, and the construction of the church coincided with a growing movement for liturgical reform that would make the Catholic faith more accessible. Above all, however, Holzmeister's design demonstrates that the language of modern functionalist architecture could assume a variety of symbolic meanings, often at variance with the political values of the pioneering figures of the Werkbund and, later, the Bauhaus.

The examples of Frank and Holzmeister indicate the very different forms and purposes that modern architecture could take in the early twentieth century. The fact that they have, until recently, been written out of orthodox histories of modernism says much about the continuing influence of a conceptual framework that was formed in the 1920s and has shaped the historiographic imagination since then. The brief consideration of their work undertaken here indicates, perhaps, the need for those histories to be rethought.

Rakousko se v meziválečném období sice po zásluze proslavilo zástavbou „rudé Vídně“, žádný architekt sám o sobě ale z mnoha důvodů nedosáhl věhlasu jejího programu sociálního bydlení. Renomovaní tvůrci před první světovou válkou vyzdvihli hlavní město mezi centra modernismu, nicméně Otto Wagner zemřel roku 1918 a Adolf Loos i Josef Hoffmann později už spíše opakovali a obměňovali myšlenky předchozích desetiletí. Především však tvůrci, kteří dozrávali ve dvacátých letech, viděli budoucnost architektury jinde než skupina kolem Bauhausu a kolem zástupců mezinárodního stylu. Tvůrci jako Clemens Holzmeister nebo Josef Frank nezakládali své dílo na technických inovacích, funkcionalistických formách ani sociálnědemokratické myšlence kolektivního bydlení. Formální, prostorové a strukturální experimenty propojovali s tvaroslovím postaveným na obeznámenosti s historickými tradicemi. Některé tyto myšlenky Josef Frank shrnul v knize *Architektura jako symbol* (1931). Zastával názor, že stavitel musí do své tvorby v zájmu srozumitelnosti zakomponovat již zavedenou symboliku. Obdobně smýšlel také Clemens Holzmeister, i když politicky tíhl ke katolickému konzervativismu. Oba však byli se svým odlišným přístupem k modernismu v důsledku sílícího tlaku funkcionalismu odsunuti na okraj. Nyní se jim a jejich současníkům znovu dostává zasloužené pozornosti. Připomínka existence „jiného modernismu“ v meziválečném období nám ukazuje, co všechno z vývoje architektury bylo pod vlivem převládajícího příběhu modernismu dosud zjednodušováno a zkreslováno.



Hubert Gessner, *Karl-Seitz-Hof*, Vienna, 1926–33.
Photo: Bernhard Wenzl (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Josef Hoffmann, Josef Frank, Oskar Strnad, Oskar
Wlach, Franz Schuster, Adolf Loos, Margarete Lihotzky, Karl
Dirnhuber, and Peter Behrens, *The Winarskyhof*, Vienna,
1924–26. Photo: Bernhard Wenzl (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Clemens Holzmeister, *The Seipel-Dollfuss Memorial
Church*, 1934. Photo: Wolfgang Glock (CC BY-SA 3.0).